E 385
.B471

MR. BENTON'S LETTER

TO

MAJ. GEN. DAVIS, OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI,

DECLINING

THE NOMINATION OF THE CONVENTION OF THAT STATE;

DEFENDING

THE NOMINATION OF MR. VAN BUREN FOR THE PRESIDENCY;

AND RECOMMENDING

HARMONY, CONCERT, AND UNION,

TO THE

DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF THE UNITED STATES.

CITY OF WASHINGTON:
PRINTED BY BLAIR & RIVES.

1835.

E 415
.E47

WASHINGTON CITY, January 1st, 1835.

DEAR SIR,—We have learned that you have declined permitting your name to be used, as a candidate for the Vice Presidency of the United States, and that you have addressed a letter to that effect, some time since, to the Committhe of the State Convention of Mississippi, by whom you were nominated for that high office. It will be a considerable time before your determination, communicated through that channel, can be known to the People of the United States; we therefore request the favor of a copy of your letter, if you retained one, for publication at this place, in order that your friends elsewhere, as well as in Mississippi, may have an early opportunity of turning their attention to some other suitable person.

Yours, with great respect,

ROBT. T. LYTLE, (of Ohio,)
HENRY HUBBARD, (of New Hampshire,)
RATLIFF BOON, (of Indiana,)
H. A. MUHLENBERG, (of Pennsylvania.)

Honorable THOS. H. BENTON.

WASHINGTON CITY, January 2d, 1835.

GENTLEMEN,—I herewith send you a copy of my letter, declining the nomination of the Mississippi State Convention, for the Vice Presidency of the U. States. Fairness towards my political friends in every part of the Union, required me to let them know at once what my determination was; and this I have done in many private letters, and in all the conversations which I have held on the subject. The nomination in Mississippi was the first one which came from a *State* Convention, and therefore the first one which seemed to me to justify a public letter, and to present the question in such a form as would save me from the ridicule of declining what no State had offered. The letter to Mississippi was intended for publication, to save my friends any further trouble on my account. It was expected to reach, in its circuit, my friends in every quarter; and as you suggest that it must be a considerable time before it could return from the State of Mississippi through the newspapers, and that in the meantime, my friends elsewhere, might wish earlier information, that they might turn their attention to some other person, I cheerfully comply with your request, and furnish the copy for publication here.

Yours, respectfully,

THOMAS H. BENTON.

Messrs. R. T. LYTLE, H HUBBARD,
R. BOON, and H. A. MUHLENBERG.

MR. BENTON'S LETTER.

Washington City, Dec. 16th, 1834.

Dear Sir: Your kind letter of the 8th ultimo has been duly received, and I take great pleasure in returning you my thanks for the friendship you have shewn me, and which I shall be happy to acknowledge by acts, rather than words, whenever an opportunity shall occur.

The recommendation for the Vice Presidency of the United States, which the Democratic Convention of your State has done me the honor to make, is, in the highest degree, flattering and honorable to me, and commands the expression of my deepest gratitude; but, justice to myself, and to our political friends, requires me to say at once, and with the candor, and decision, which rejects all disguise, and palters with no retraction, that I cannot consent to go upon the list of candidates for the eminent office for which I have been proposed.

I consider the ensuing election for President, and Vice President, as one among the most important that ever took place in our country; ranking with that of 1800, when the democratic principle first triumphed in the person of Mr. Jefferson, and with the two elections of 1828, and 1832, when the same principle again triumphed in the person of General Jackson; and I should look upon all the advantages recovered for the constitution, and the people, in these two last triumphs, as lost, and gone, unless the democracy of the Union shall again triumph in the election of 1836. To succeed in that election, will require the most perfect harmony, and union, among ourselves. To secure this union and harmony, we must have as few aspirants for the offices of President, and Vice President, as possible; and, to diminish the number of these aspirants, I, for one, shall refuse to go upon the list: and will remain in the ranks of the voters, ready to support the cause of democracy, by supporting the election of the candidates which shall be selected by a General Convention of the democratic party.

But, while respectfully declining, for myself, the highly honorable and flattering recommendation of your convention, I take a particu-

lar pleasure in expressing the gratification which I feel, at seeing the nomination which you have made in favor of Mr. Van Buren. I have known that gentleman long, and intimately. We entered the Senate of the United States together, thirteen years ago, sat six years in seats next to each other, were always personally friendly, generally acted together on leading subjects, and always interchanged communications, and reciprocated confidence; and thus, occupying a position to give me an opportunity of becoming thoroughly acquainted whith his principles, and character, the result of the whole has been, that I have long since considered him, and so indicated him to my friends, as the most fit, and suitable person to fill the presidental chair after the expiration of President Jackson's second term. In political principles he is thoroughly democratic, and comes as near the Jeffersonian standard as any statesman now on the stage of public life. In abilities, experience, and business habits, he is beyond the reach of cavil, or dispute. Personally he is inattackable; for the whole volume of his private life contains not a single act which requires explanation, or defence. In constitutional temperament he is peculiarly adapted to the station, and the times; for no human being could be more free from every taint of envy, malignity, or revenge; or, could possess, in a more eminent degree, that happy conjunction of firmness of purpose, with suavity of manners, which contributes so much to the successful administration of public affairs, and is so essential, and becoming, in a high public functionary. The State from which he comes, and of which, successive elections for two and twenty years prove him to be the favorite son, is also to be taken into the account in the list of his recommendations; that great State which, in the eventful struggle of 1800, turned the scales of the presidential election in favor of Mr. Jefferson,—which has supported every democratic administration from that day to this; a State which now numbers two millions of inhabitants,—gives forty-two votes in the presidential election,—and never saw one of her own sons exalted to the presidential office.

But what has he done? What has Mr. Van Buren done, that he should be elected President? This is the inquiry, as flippantly, as ignorantly, put by those who would veil, or disparage the merits of this gentleman; when it would be much more regular and pertinent to ask, what has such a man as this done, that he should *not* be made President?—But, to answer the inquiry as put: It might, perhaps,

be sufficient, so far at least as the comparative merits of competitors are concerned, to point to his course in the Senate of the United States during the eight years that he sat in that body; and to his conduct since in the high offices to which he has been called by his native State, by President Jackson, and by the American People. This might be sufficient between Mr. Van Buren and others; but it would not be sufficient for himself. Justice to him would require the answer to go further back,—to the war of 1812,—when he was a member of the New York Senate; when the fate of Mr. Madison's administration, and of the Union itself, depended upon the conduct of that great State,—great in men and means,—and greater in position, a frontier to New England and to Canada,—to British arms and Hartford Convention treason;—and when that conduct, to the dismay of every patriot bosom, was seen to hang, for nearly two years, in the doubtful scales of suspense. The federalists had the majority in the House of Representatives; the democracy had the Senate and the Governor; and for two successive sessions no measure could be adopted in support of the war. Every aid proposed by the Governor and Senate, was rejected by the House of Representatives. Every State paper issued by one, was answered by the other. Continual disagreements took place; innumerable conferences were had; the Hall of the House of Representatives was the scene of contestation; and every conference was a public exhibition of parliamentary conflict,—a public trial of intellectual digladiation,—in which each side, represented by committees of its ablest men, and in the presence of both Houses, and of assembled multitudes, exerted itself to the utmost to justify itself, and to put the other in the wrong, to operate upon public opinion, govern the impending elections, and acquire the ascendency in the ensuing legislature. Mr. Van Buren, then a young man, had just entered the Senate at the commencement of this extraordinary struggle. He entered it, November, 1812; and had just distinguished himself in the opposition of his county to the renewal of the first national Bank charter,—in the support of Vice President Clinton for giving the casting vote against it —and in his noble support of Governor Tompkins, for his Roman energy in proroguing the General Assembly, (April, 1812,) which could not otherwise be prevented from receiving, and embodying, the transmigratory soul of that defunct institution, and giving it a new existence, in a new place, under an altered name, and modified

form. He was politically born out of this conflict, and came into the legislature against the Bank, and for the war. He was the man which the occasion required; the ready writer,—prompt debater,—judicious counsellor; courteous in manners,—firm in purpose,—inflexible in principles. He contrived the measures,—brought forward the bills and reports,—delivered the speeches,—and drew the State papers, (especially the powerful address to the republican voters of the State,) which, eventually, vanquished the federal party, turned the doubtful scales, and gave the elections of April, 1814, to the friends and supporters of Madison and the war; an event, the intelligence of which was received at Washington with an exultation only inferior to that with which was received the news of the victory of New Orleans. The new Legislature, now democratic in both branches, was quickly convened by Governor Tompkins; and Mr. Van Buren had the honor to bring forward, and carry through, amidst the applauses of patriots, and the denunciation of the anti-war party, the most energetic war measure ever adopted in our America,—the classification bill, as he called it, the conscription bill, as they called it. By this bill, the provisions of which, by a new and summary process, were so contrived as to act upon property, as well as upon persons, an army of twelve thousand State troops, were immediately to be raised; to serve for two years, and to be placed at the disposition of the General Government. The peace which was signed in the last days of December, 1814, rendered this great measure of New York inoperative; but its merit was acknowledged by all patriots at the time; the principle of it was adopted by Mr. Madison's administration; recommended by the Secretary at War, Mr. Monroe, to the Congress of the United States, and found by that body too energetic to be passed. To complete his course in support of the war, and to crown his meritorious labors to bring it to a happy close, it became Mr. Van Buren's fortune to draw up the vote of thanks of the greatest State in the Union, to the greatest General which the war had produced,—"*the thanks of the New York legislature to Major General* JACKSON, *his gallant officers and troops, for their wonderful, and heroic victory, in defence of the grand emporium of the West.*" Such was the appropriate conclusion to his patriotic services in support of the war: services, to be sure, not rivalling in splendor the heroic achievements of victorious arms; but services, nevertheless, both honorable, and meritorious, in their

place; and without which battles cannot be fought, victories cannot be won, nor countries be saved. Martial renown, it is true, he did not acquire, nor attempt; but the want of that fascination to his name can hardly be objected to him, in these days, when the political ascendency of military chieftains is so pathetically deplored, and when the entire perils of the republic are supposed to be compressed into the single danger of a military despotism.

Such is the answer, in brief, and in part, to the flippant inquiry, What has he done?

The vote in the Senate, for the tariff of 1828, has sometimes been objected to Mr. Van Buren; but with how much ignorance of the truth, let facts attest.

He was the first eminent member of Congress, north of the Potomac, to open the war, at the right point, upon that tariff of 1828, then undergoing the process of incubation through the instrumentality of a Convention to sit at Harrisburg. His speech at Albany, in July, 1827, openly characterized that measure as a political manœuvre to influence the impending presidential election; and the graphic expression, "*a measure proceeding more from the* CLOSET *of the* POLITICIAN *than from the* WORKSHOP *of the* MANUFACTURER," so opportunely and felicitously used in that speech, soon became the opinion of the public, and subsequently received the impress of verification from the abandonment, and the manner of abandoning, of the whole fabric of the high tariff policy. Failing to carry any body into the Presidential chair, its doom pronounced by the election of Jackson and Van Buren,* it was abandoned, as it had been created, upon a political calculation; and expired under a *fiat* emanating, not from the *workshop of the manufacturer*, but from the *closet of the politician*.—True, that Mr. Van Buren voted for the tariff of 1828, notwithstanding his speech of 1827; but, equally true, that he voted under instructions from his State Legislature, and in obedience to the great democratic principle (*demos*, the people, *krateo*, to govern) which has always formed a distinguishing feature, and a dividing land-mark, between the two great political parties which, under whatsoever name, have always existed, and still exist, in our country.—Sitting in the chair next to him at the time of that vote, voting as he did, and upon the same principle; interchanging opinions without reserve, or disguise, it comes within the perception of my own senses to know, that he felt great repugnance to the provisions

*Over the high tariff champions, Clay and Sergeant.

of that tariff act of '28, and voted for it, as I did, in obedience to a principle which we both hold sacred.

No public man, since the days of Mr. Jefferson, has been pursued with more bitterness than Mr. Van Buren; none, not excepting Mr. Jefferson himself, has ever had to withstand the combined assaults of so many, and such formidable powers. His prominent position, in relation to the next Presidency, has drawn upon him the general attack of other candidates,—themselves as well as their friends; for, in these days, (how different from former times!) candidates for the Presidency are seen to take the field for themselves,—banging away at their competitors,—sounding the notes of their own applause,—and dealing in the tricks, and cant, of veteran cross-road, or ale-house, electioneerers. His old opposition, and early declaration (1826) against the Bank of the United States, has brought upon him the pervading vengeance of that powerful institution; and subjectèd him to the vicarious vituperation of subaltern assailants, inflamed with a wrath, not their own, in whatsoever spot that terrific institution maintains a branch, or a press, retains an adherent, or holds a debtor. (It was under the stimulus, and predictions of the Bank press, that Mr. Van Buren was rejected by the Senate in 1832.) Yet in all this combination of powers against him, and in all these unrelenting attacks, there is no specification of misconduct. All is vague, general, indefinite, mysterious. Mr. Crawford, the most open, direct, and palpable of public men, was run down upon the empty cry of "*giant at intrigue!*" a second edition of that cry, now stereotyped for harder use, is expected to perform the same service upon Mr. Van Buren; while the originators and repeaters of the cry, in both instances, have found it equally impossible to specify a case of intrigue in the life of one, or the other, of these gentlemen.

Safety fund banks, is another of those cries raised against him; as if there was any thing in the system of those banks to make the banking system worse; or, as if the money, and politics of these safety fund banks, were at the service of Mr. Van Buren. On the contrary, it is not even pretended by his enemies that he owns a single dollar of stock in any one of these banks! and I have been frequently informed, from sources entitled to my confidence, that he does not own a dollar of interest in any bank in the world! that he has wholly abstained from becomming the owner of any bank stock, or taking an interest in any company, incorporated by

the Legislature, since he first became a member of that body, above two-and-twenty, years ago. And as for the politics of the safety fund banks, it has been recently, and authentically shown that a vast majority of them are under the control of his most determined and active political opponents.

No public man has been more opposed to the extension of the banking system than Mr. Van Buren. The journals of the New York Legislature show that the many years during which he was a prominent member of that body, he exerted himself in a continued and zealous opposition to the increase of banks; and, upon his elevation to the Chief Magistracy of the State, finding the system of banks so incorporated with the business and interests of the People, as to render its abolishment impossible, he turned his attention to its improvement, and to the establishment of such guards against fraudulent, or even unfortunate bankruptcy, as would, under all circumstances, protect the holders of notes against loss. The safety fund system was the result of views of this kind; and if its complete success hitherto (for no bank has failed under it,) and the continued support and confidence of the representatives of two millions of people, are not sufficient to attest its efficacy, there is one consideration at least, which should operate so far in its favor as to save it from the sneers of those who cannot tell what the safety fund system is; and that is, the perfect ease and composure with which the whole of these banks rode out the storm of Senatorial and United States Bank assault, panic, and pressure, upon them last winter! This consideration should save Mr. Van Buren from the censure of some people, if it cannot attract their applause. For the rest, he is a real hard money man; opposed to the paper system—in favor of a national currency of gold—in favor of an adequate silver currency for common use—against the small note currency—and in favor of confining bank notes to their appropriate sphere and original function, that of large notes for large transactions, and mercantile operations.

Non-committal, is another of the flippant phrases, got by rote, and parroted against Mr. Van Buren. He never commits himself, say these veracious observers! he never shows his hand, till he sees which way the game is going! Is this true? Is there any foundation for it? On the contrary, is it not contradicted by public and notorious facts? by the uniform tenor of his entire public life for near a quarter of a century? To repeat nothing of what has been said of

his opposition to the first Bank of the United States, his support of Vice President Clinton for giving the casting vote against the re-charter of that institution, his support of Governor Tompkins, in the extraordinary measure of proroguing the New York Legislature, to prevent the metempsychosis of the Bank, and its revivification, in the City of New York; to repeat nothing of all this, and of his undaunted and brilliant support of the war, from its beginning to its end, I shall refer only to what has happened in my own time, and under my own eyes. His firm, and devoted, support of Mr. Crawford, in the contest of 1824, when that eminent citizen, prostrate with disease, and inhumanly assailed, seemed to be doomed to inevitable defeat; was that non-committal? His early espousal of General Jackson's cause, after the election in the House of Representatives, in February, 1825, and his steadfast opposition to Mr. Adams's administration; was that non-committal? His prominent stand against the Panama Mission, when that mission was believed to be irresistibly popular, and was pressed upon the Senate to crush the opposition members; was that also a wily piece of non-committal policy? His declaration against the Bank of the United States in the year 1826; was that the conduct of a man waiting to see the issue before he could take his side? The removal of the deposites, and the panic scene of last winter, in which so many gave way, and so many others folded their arms until the struggle was over, while Mr. Van Buren, both by his own conduct, and that of his friends, gave an undaunted support to that masterly stroke of the President; is this also to be called a non-committal line of conduct, and the evidence of a temper that sees the issue before it decides? The fact is, this ridiculous and nonsensical charge, is so unfounded and absurd, so easily refuted, and not only refuted, but turned to the honor and advantage of Mr. Van Buren, that his friends might have ran the risk of being suspected of having invented it themselves, and put it into circulation, just to give some others of his friends a brilliant opportunity of emblazoning his merits! were it not that the blind enmity of his competitors has put the accusation upon record, and enabled his friends to exculpate themselves, and to prove home the original charge against his undisputed opponents.

For one thing Mr. Van Buren has reason to be thankful to his enemies; it is, for having began the war upon him so soon! There is time enough yet for truth and justice to do their office, and to dispel

every cloud of prejudice which the jealousy of rivals, the vengeance of the Bank, and the ignorance of dupes, has hung over his name.

Union, harmony, self-denial, concession,—every thing for the cause, nothing for men,—should be the watchword, and motto of the democratic party.

Disconnected from the election,—a voter, and not a candidate,—having no object in view but to preserve the union of the democratic party, and to prevent the administration of the public affairs from relapsing into hands that would undo every thing; hands that would destroy every limit to the constitution, by latitudinous constructions, —which would replunge the country into debt, and taxes, by the reckless, wilful, systematic, ungovernable, headlong, stubborn, support of every wasteful and extravagant expenditure,—that would re-deliver the country into the hands of an institution which has proved the scourge of the people—and which would instantly revive the dominion of paper-money, by arresting the progress of the gold and silver currency: having no object in view but to prevent these calamities, I may be permitted to say a word, without incurring the imputation of speaking from interested motives, on the vital point of union in the democratic party.

The obligation upon good men to unite, when bad men combine, is as clear in politics as it is in morals. Fidelity to this obligation has, heretofore, saved the republic, and was never more indispensable to its safety than at the present moment. The efforts made under the elder Adams, above thirty years ago, to subvert the principles of our Government, produced a union of the *productive, and burthen-bearing* classes, in every quarter of the republic. Planters, farmers, laborers, mechanics, (with a slight infusion from the commercial and professional interests,) whether on this side or that of the Potomac, whether East or West of the Alleghany mountains, stood together upon the principle of common right, and the sense of common danger, and effected that first great union of the democratic party which achieved the civil revolution of 1800, arrested the downward course of the Government, and turned back the national administration to its republican principles, and economical habits.

The sagacious mind of Mr. Jefferson well discerned, in the homogeneous elements of which this united party was composed, the appropriate materials for a republican Government; and to the permanent conjunction of these elements, he constantly looked for the

only insurmountable barrier to the approaches of oligarchy and aristocracy. Actuated by a zeal which has never been excelled, for the success and perpetuity of the Democratic cause, he labored assiduously in his high office, and subsequent retirement, in his conversations, and letters, to cement, sustain, and perpetuate a party, on the union and indivisibility of which he solely relied for the preservation of our republic. It was the political power, resulting from this auspicious union, (to say nothing of several other occasions,) which carried us safely and triumphantly through the late war; enabling the Government to withstand, on one hand, the paralyzing machinations of a disaffected aristocracy, and to repel on the other, the hostile attacks of a great nation.

The first relaxation of the ties which bound together the Democracy of the North and South, East and West, was followed by the restoration to power of federal men, and the re-appearance in the administration of federal doctrines, and federal measures. The younger Mr. Adams crept into power through the first breach that was made in the Democratic ranks; and immediately proclaimed the fundamental principles which lie at the bottom of ancient federalism, and modern whiggism,—"*the representative not to be palsied by the will of his constituents*;"—"*constitutional scruples to be solved in practical blessings*;"—two doctrines, one of which would leave the people without representatives, and the other would leave the Government without a constitution. The ultra federalism of this gentleman's administration, fortunately for the country, led to the re-union of those homogeneous elements, by the first union of which the elder Mr. Adams had been ejected from power; and this re-union immediately produced a second civil revolution not less vital to the republic than the first one, of 1800: a revolution to which we are indebted for the election of a President who has turned back the Government, so far as in his power lies, to the principles of the constitution, and to the practice of economy,—who has directed the action of the Government to patriotic objects,—saved the people from the cruel dominion of a heartless moneyed power;—withstood the combined assaults of the Bank, and its allied Statesmen,—and frustrated a conspiracy against the liberty, and the property, of the people, but little less atrocious in its design, and little less disastrous in its intended effects, than that conspiracy from which Cicero delivered the Roman people, and for the frustration of which he was hailed by

Cato, in the assembled presence of all Rome, with the glorious appellation of *Pater Patriæ*—Father of his Country.

The democracy of the four quarters of the Union, now united, victorious, happy, and secure, under the administration of President Jackson; shall it disband, and fall to pieces the instant that great man retires? This is what federalism hopes, foretels, promotes, intrigues, prays, and pants for. Shall this be—and through whose fault? Shall sectional prejudices, lust of power, contention for office, (that bane of freedom;) shall personal preferences, so amiable in private life, so weak in politics; shall these small causes—these Lilliputian tactics—be suffered to work the disruption of the democratic union? to separate the republican of the South and West, from his brother of the North and East? and, in that separation, to make a new opening for the second restoration of federalism (under its *alius dictus* of whiggism,) and the permanent enslavement of the *producing, and burthen-bearing* classes of the community?

Bear with me if I speak without disguise, and say, if these things happen, it must be through the fault of the South and West.

Here are the facts:

It has so happened that, although every Southern President (four in number) and the only Western one (through his two terms) has received the warm support of Northern Democracy, yet no Northern President has ever yet received the support of the South and West. Hitherto this peculiar, and one-sided result, has left no sting —created no heart burnings—in the bosom of Northern Democracy, because it was the result, not of sectional bigotry, but of facts, and principles. The administrations of the two Northern Presidents were alike offensive to republicans of all quarters, and were put down by the joint voices of a united Democracy

But suppose this state of things now to be changed, and a Democratic candidate to be presented from the North; ought that candidate to be opposed by the Democracy of the South and West? Suppose that candidate to be one coming as near to the Jeffersonian standard (to say more might seem invidious; to say that much is enough for the argument,) suppose such a candidate to be presented; ought the Democracy of the South and West, to reject him? Could they do it, without showing a disposition to monopolize the Presidential office? and to go on for an indefinite succession, after having already possessed the office for forty years, out of forty-eight? What would be

the effect of such a stand, taken by the South and West, on the harmony of the Democratic party? Certainly to destroy it! What would be its effect on the harmony of the States? Certainly to array them against each other! What would be its effect on the formation of parties? Certainly to change it from the ground of principle, to the ground of territory! to substitute a geographical basis, for the political basis, on which parties now rest! Could these things be desirable to any friend of popular government; to any considerate, and reflecting man in the South, or West? On the contrary, should not the Democracy of the South and West, rejoice at an opportunity to show themselves superior to sectional bigotry, devoted to principle, intent upon the general harmony, inaccessible to intrigue, or to weakness; and ready to support the cause of democracy, whether the representative of the cause comes from this, or that side, of a river, or a mountain?—A Southern and a Western man myself, this is the state of my own feelings, and I rejoice to see that your convention has acted upon them. And if, what I have here written (and which I could not have written if I had accepted the most honorable and gratifying nomination of your convention) if this letter, too long for the occasion, but too short for my feelings! if it shall contribute to prevent the disruption of the republican party, and the consequent loss of all the advantages recovered for the constitution and the People, under the administration of President Jackson, then shall I feel the consolation of having done a better service to the Republic by refusing to take, than I can ever do, by taking, office.

Hoping then, my dear sir, that the nomination of your Convention may have its full effect in favor of Mr. Van Buren, and that it may be entirely forgotten, so far as it regards myself, except in the grateful recollections of my own bosom,

I remain, most truly and sincerely yours,

THOMAS H. BENTON.

Major General Davis,
Manchester, Mississippi.

39 W

WERT BOOKBINDING
JAN 1989
Grantville, PA